

Sediment Transport at Density Fronts in Shallow Water

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Award Number: N00014-08-1-0846

LONG-TERM GOALS

The goal of this research is to quantify through observations and modeling how density fronts in shallow estuarine flows impact the mobilization, redistribution, trapping, and deposition of suspended sediment.

OBJECTIVES

The objectives of this research program are to

- implement a high-resolution, 3-dimensional, finite-volume hydrodynamic model of tidal flats field site including advanced sediment transport algorithms,
- integrate and test a set of field instruments to measure density, velocity, and suspended sediment concentration at density fronts in shallow water (< 1 m),
- characterize flow and suspended sediment at a density front through the tidal inundation cycle as it travels across the intertidal zone, and
- combine the observations and model results to (1) quantify sediment suspension, trapping, and circulation at the front, (2) determine effects of frontal sediment transport on the net sediment fluxes in shallow estuarine settings, and (3) evaluate and improve the sediment transport model.

APPROACH

The research approach combines observational and modeling techniques. In the field, we measured velocity and suspended sediment at high resolution in shallow flows, tracking the evolution of the salinity front through the tidal cycle. The instrumentation incorporated an acoustic Doppler current profiler (ADCP) to measure currents and a profiling conductivity-temperature-depth sensor (CTD) to measure water column salinity and density. Suspended sediment concentrations were based on a combination of acoustic and optical sensors, with calibration provided by gravimetric analysis of water samples taken during the surveys. A major field effort occurred in June 2009 on the Skagit Tidal flats in Puget Sound, coordinated with other researchers in the Tidal Flats DRI. Focused, Lagrangian observations of the shallow density front and its evolution through the tidal cycle were complemented by a large scale array of moored instruments deployed during the same period (along with Geyer and Traykovski).

Report Documentation Page				Form Approved OMB No. 0704-0188	
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1. REPORT DATE 30 SEP 2011		2. REPORT TYPE		3. DATES COVERED 00-00-2011 to 00-00-2011	
4. TITLE AND SUBTITLE Sediment Transport at Density Fronts in Shallow Water				5a. CONTRACT NUMBER	
				5b. GRANT NUMBER	
				5c. PROGRAM ELEMENT NUMBER	
6. AUTHOR(S)				5d. PROJECT NUMBER	
				5e. TASK NUMBER	
				5f. WORK UNIT NUMBER	
7. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION NAME(S) AND ADDRESS(ES) Woods Hole Oceanographic Institution, Applied Ocean Physics and Engineering, MS #12, Woods Hole, MA, 02543				8. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION REPORT NUMBER	
9. SPONSORING/MONITORING AGENCY NAME(S) AND ADDRESS(ES)				10. SPONSOR/MONITOR'S ACRONYM(S)	
				11. SPONSOR/MONITOR'S REPORT NUMBER(S)	
12. DISTRIBUTION/AVAILABILITY STATEMENT Approved for public release; distribution unlimited					
13. SUPPLEMENTARY NOTES					
14. ABSTRACT					
15. SUBJECT TERMS					
16. SECURITY CLASSIFICATION OF:			17. LIMITATION OF ABSTRACT Same as Report (SAR)	18. NUMBER OF PAGES 10	19a. NAME OF RESPONSIBLE PERSON
a. REPORT unclassified	b. ABSTRACT unclassified	c. THIS PAGE unclassified			

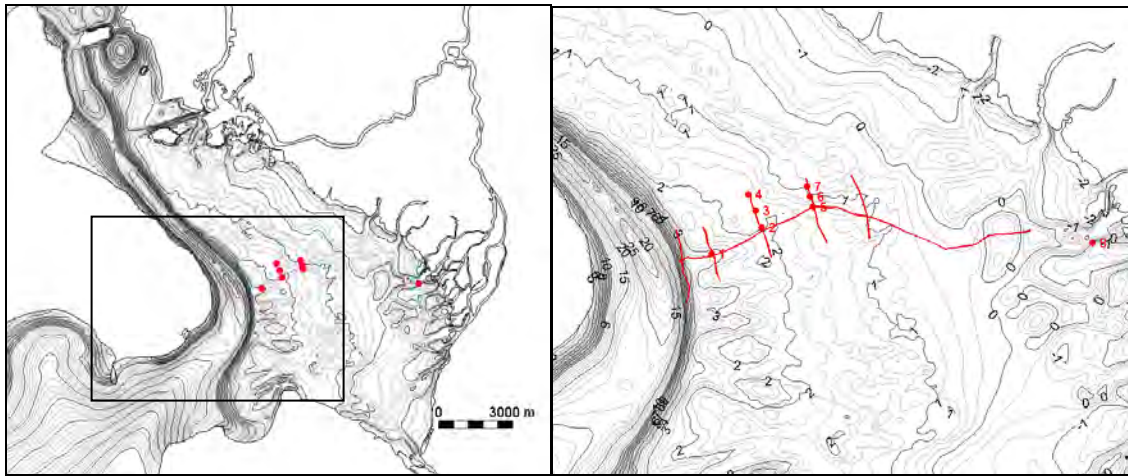


Figure 1. *Bathymetry of the Skagit Bay tidal flats (left) with a zoom on the study area on the southern flats (right). Red dots indicate frame locations and lines show across-flats and across-channel survey lines.*

In parallel with the observations, we developed a numerical modeling of the Skagit tidal flats. The model uses the Finite Volume Coastal Ocean Model (FVCOM), but has been modified to incorporate recent advancements in sediment transport modeling through code from the Community Sediment Transport Model System (CSTMS). The unstructured grid of FVCOM allows the model to simulate conditions broadly across the Skagit flats and surrounding region, but with focused grid resolution near the observations. The observations were used to calibrate the model and to evaluate how well the model resolves sharp salinity gradients at fronts, both across the tidal flats and at lateral fronts coinciding with channel-shoal bathymetry. Collectively, analyses of the observations and model were used to quantify how local frontal processes on scales of 10's to 100's of meters impact retention, redistribution, and export of sediment over tidal flats on scales of kilometers.

WORK COMPLETED

A major field effort was conducted in June 2009. We deployed an array of instrument platforms on Skagit flats (Fig. 1) to measure the flow and sediment-transport on the flats. After instrument deployment and just before recovery (approximately 5 days each period), we conducted high-resolution surveys of the currents, density, and suspended sediment distributions on the flats over multiple tidal cycles. Surveys (locations shown in Fig. 1) were designed to characterize the cross-flat structure of the salinity front, and how the lateral distribution of density, currents, and suspended sediment depend on the structure of distributary channels on the flats.

The instrumentation at the quadpod stations measured acoustic profiles and optical point measurements of suspended sediment concentration, bed elevation, horizontal and vertical velocity, conductivity, temperature and depth. The acoustic profiles of sediment concentration and bed elevation were measured with Acoustic Backscatter Sensors (ABSs) and Pulse Coherent Doppler profilers. Each of the pods had 1 or 2 near-bed Acoustic Doppler Velocimeters (ADVs, with pressure sensor) for measurements of tidal currents, waves and turbulence. The stations had accompanying surface moorings with TS/OBS sensors, to quantify vertical and horizontal salinity and sediment gradients.

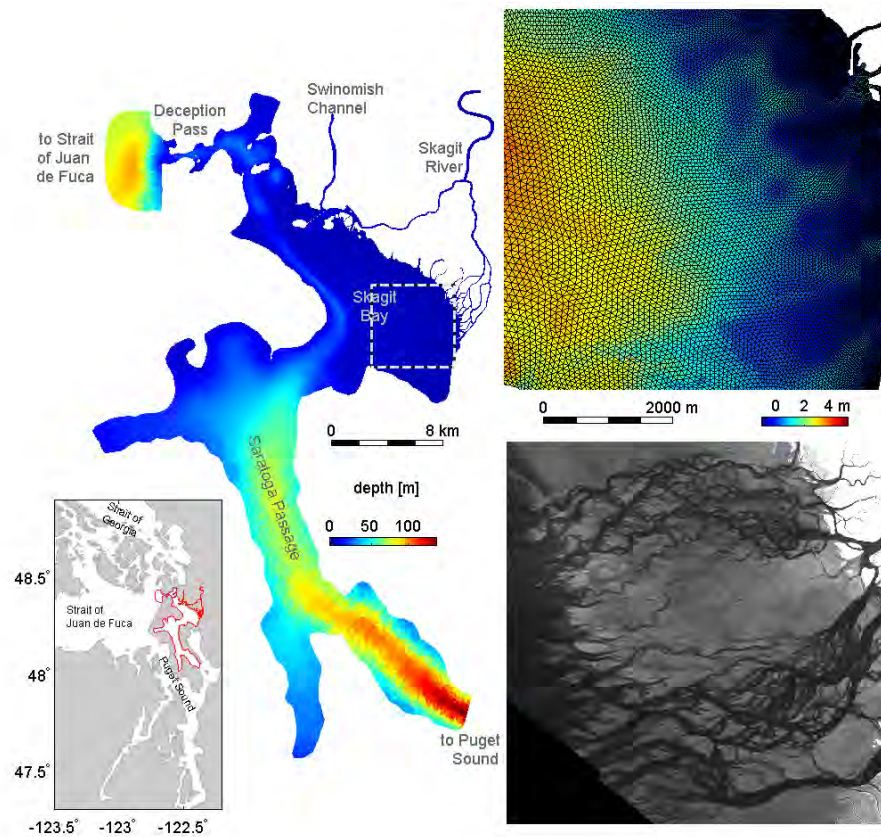


Figure 2. Model grid of Skagit flats and surrounding region: (lower left) location relative to Puget Sound and Strait of Juan de Fuca; (upper left) domain bathymetry, (upper right) zoom on southern tidal flats shown in box, with grid cells (minimum horizontal grid scale is about 10 m); (lower right) near infrared image of channels on emergent tidal flats around low tide (image courtesy K. Hooper, Artete Assoc.).

Extensive efforts went into development of a high-resolution numerical of the Skagit tidal flats and surrounding region. Bathymetry was collected from multiple sources and combined to create an unstructured grid (Figure 2). Grid resolution ranged from about 10 m on the flats to over 500 m in more distant parts of the domain. The bathymetry and grid in the distributary network of the Skagit were refined based on surveys of depth and discharge in the river during the June 2009 observations. Additional bathymetric data were acquired from other investigators working in the area – jet ski surveys near the mouth of the North Fork (Raubenheimer and Elgar, WHOI) and aircraft surveys using LiDAR of the most of the intertidal region (Brozena, NRL). Data for boundary forcing of tides, river discharge, and winds were also acquired and input into the model.

In addition to the grid and forcing, the hydrodynamic code (FVCOM) had to be modified and tested for this implementation. A sediment transport module using latest version of the CSTMS was implemented in FVCOM, and simulations were run for test cases and for the Skagit domain. Initial comparisons between model results and observations suggested that local wind forcing was important for generating surface wind stress that affected mean currents and vertical mixing rates. The Skagit model was

adapted to incorporate observed winds during the observation period, improving model skill for salinity and velocity at stations near the wind observations. However, analysis of wind observations at a multiple stations in the study region indicated that significant heterogeneity in the wind field that likely depended on the complex orography of Puget Sound (Giffen and Raubenheimer). To address this issue, we developed an atmospheric model of the region using the Weather Research and Forecasting model (WRF) and coupled it to FVCOM. The atmospheric model was evaluated against observations and found to have good agreement, and coupled atmospheric-hydrodynamic runs were simulated for the period of the observations on the Skagit flats.

Several manuscript were written and submitted based on data analyzed in this project, and are currently in review. Topics included an integration of model and observations quantifying impacts of estuarine and fluvial process on sediment fluxes (Ralston et al.), an analyses of generation mechanisms for tidal asymmetries on the tidal flats (Nidzieko and Ralston), and an evaluation of effects of complex topography on wind correlation length scales and implications for coastal ocean modeling (Raubenheimer et al.).

RESULTS

Model simulations were run with realistic forcing (tides, river discharge) corresponding with the observation period in June 2009. Comparisons between observed and model salinity, velocity, and water surface elevation were used to adjust key model parameters. An important result of the calibration process has been to show that low background mixing and bottom friction to accurate simulations. The Skagit flats were strongly stratified at times due to the spring freshet, with river discharge ranging between $930 \text{ m}^3 \text{ s}^{-1}$ in early June and about $450 \text{ m}^3 \text{ s}^{-1}$ by the end of the month. To maintain sharp horizontal and vertical salinity gradients, the background values for turbulent and horizontal diffusivity were set to $10^{-6} \text{ m}^2 \text{ s}^{-1}$ and 0, respectively. Similarly, the bottom roughness (z_0) was set to 0.1 mm, representative of relatively small roughness elements on the flats. One somewhat surprising result was the importance of vertical resolution for simulating the observed salinity structure on the flats. Although the shallow water depths might suggest fewer vertical levels are necessary than in models with deeper domains, the sharp vertical gradients and the relatively steep topography bottom topography in the region combined with the sigma-coordinate system of FVCOM (and many similar coastal models) can lead to spurious vertical mixing that weakens vertical and horizontal gradients. For example, model runs with 20 sigma-levels had weaker stratification on the flats, a shorter salinity intrusion, and consequently different regions of sediment trapping than simulations with 30 levels.

The calibrated model results compare well with the moored time series of water surface elevation, velocity, salinity and stratification, and with observations from spatial surveys (Figure 3). The model reflects the observed diurnal tidal pattern of extreme variability in stratification: unstratified during the strong floods, stratifying at high water and remaining stratified through the weaker ebb and flood, and mixing midway through the strong ebb. Similarly, comparisons with ADCP data show that both the magnitude and vertical structure of velocity are well-resolved in the model. Critically for suspended sediment transport calculations, the bed stresses calculated in the model compare well with near-bed stresses calculated with ADVs, including ebb-flood asymmetries. Stratification modulates the tidal stresses, with higher stresses during unstratified flood tides, and weaker stresses during stratified ebbs up until the point that stratification breaks down. Similarly, comparisons between observed (through calibrated optical and acoustic measurements) and modeled suspended sediment show good agreement.

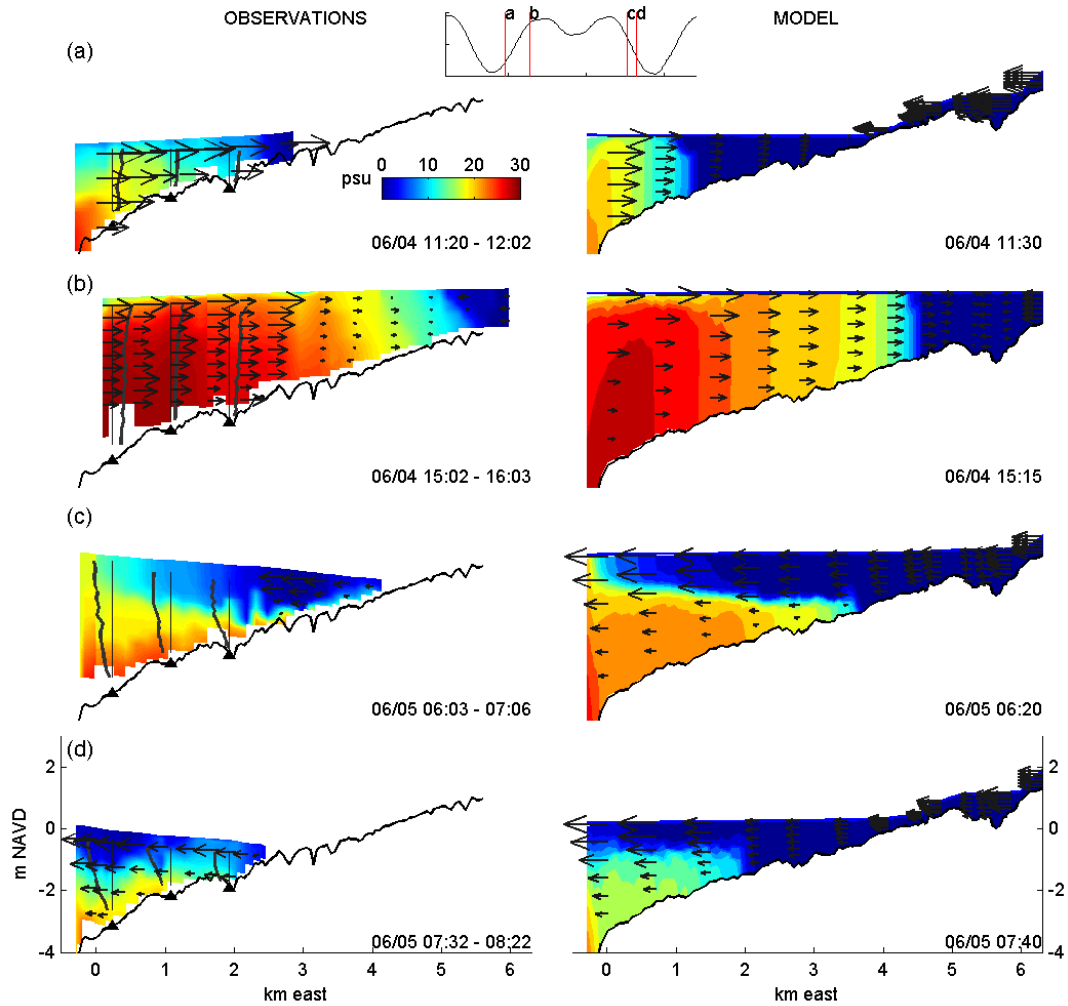


Figure 3. Across-shore transects of salinity on the Skagit flats, from observations (left) and model (right). Top 2 rows are during a flood tide, with a relatively strong horizontal salinity gradient and little stratification in the front; in both the model and observations a near surface layer of fresher water can be seen behind the front. Bottom 2 rows are during an ebb, when stratification was strong even in water as shallow as ~1 m. Location of transect is shown in Fig. 1.

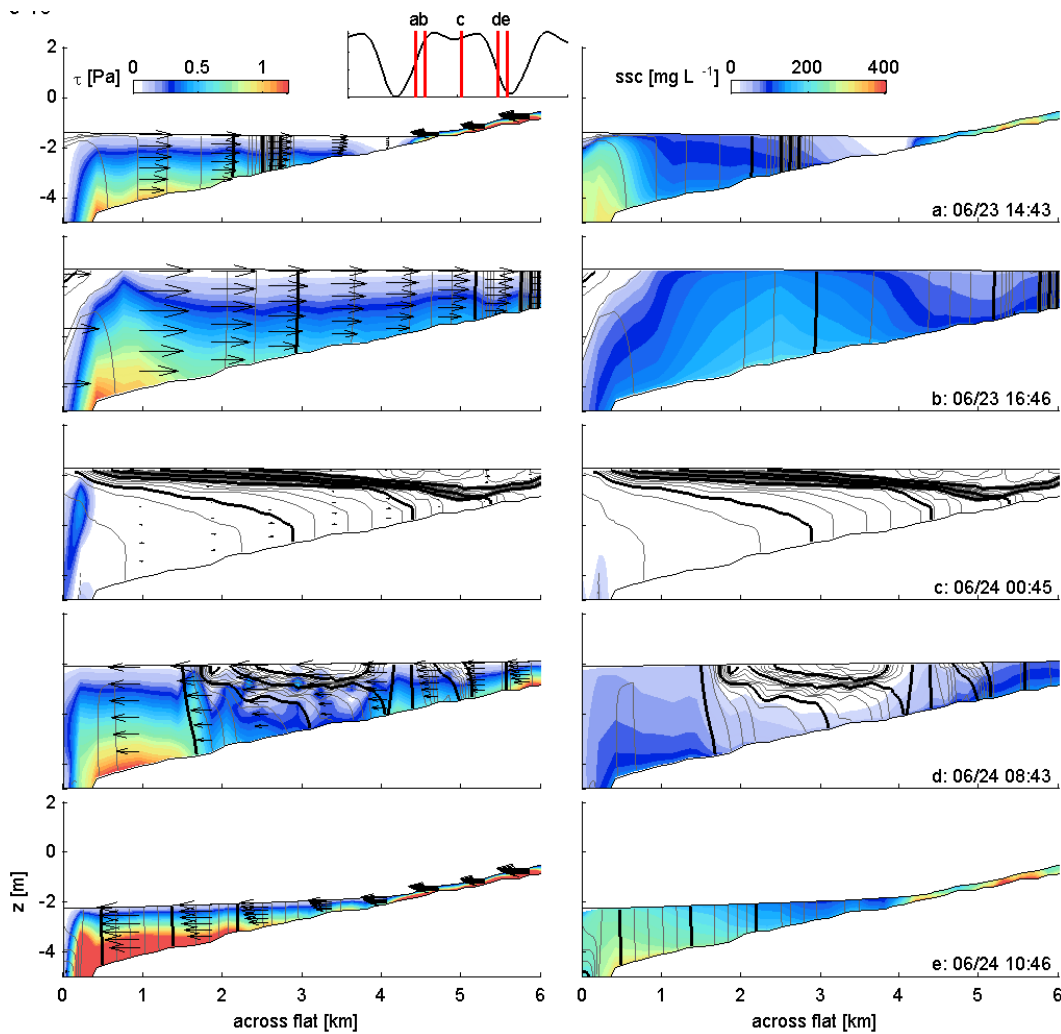


Figure 4. Across-shore transects in a channel of stress (left panels) and suspended-sediment concentration (right) from the models. Location of transect is same as in Fig. 3. Transects are from a diurnal period during spring tides, with snapshots during the large flood (top 2 rows), small ebb (middle row), and large ebb (bottom 2 rows). Salinity contours are shown, with intervals of 1 psu (thin gray) and 5 psu (thick black).

An example from the model during a diurnal tidal cycle discharge illustrates the importance of stratification and baroclinicity on sediment dynamics on Skagit tidal flats (Fig 4). During the flood, the salinity front advects across the flats with a region of high stress, and correspondingly high suspended sediment concentration, in the region of weak stratification behind the front. In contrast, early in the ensuing ebb strong stratification extends over nearly the entire width of the tidal flats, so bed stresses and sediment concentrations are minimal. As the water level falls later in the ebb, the stratification is mixed away. At the grid resolution of about 10 to 20 m in the study region, the model reproduces many of the features observed in cross-flat transects. Additionally, the model provides information on the spatial structure of the currents and freshwater that is not possible to measure synoptically in the field. For example, the North and South Forks of the Skagit each have distinct regions of influence of the flats, with a region in between the mouths that is less stratified and higher salinity.

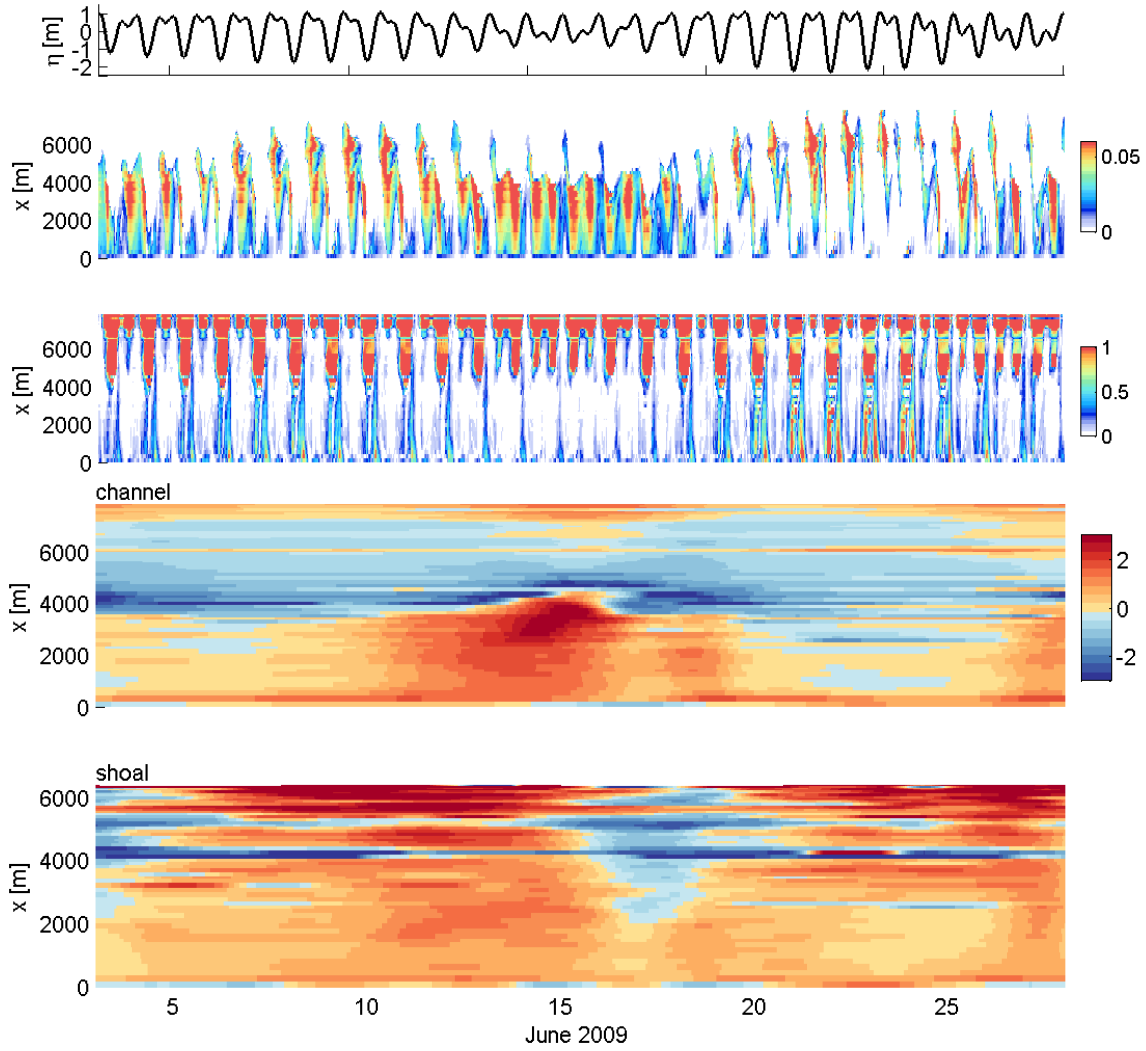


Figure 5. Model results of stratification, stress, and stress asymmetry in a section across the south Skagit tidal flats (location shown in Fig 1): [top panel] water surface elevation, [panel 2] stratification (buoyancy frequency) as a function of distance across the flats and time (s^{-2}), [panel 3] bottom stress ($N m^{-2}$), [panel 4] stress asymmetry in a tributary channel (skewness, with flood-directed asymmetry > 0 and ebb-directed < 0), [panel 5] stress asymmetry on tidal flats adjacent to the tributary channel shown in [panel 4].

A fundamental question then is how the tidal variability in baroclinicity and stratification affects sediment transport across the tidal flats. Alternatively, is it necessary to resolve the density structure in these shallow environments to accurately simulation the sediment fluxes? The model results from the Skagit indicate that it is. The baroclinic forcing and stratification generate asymmetries in bottom stress and consequently in sediment transport. During flood tides, the baroclinic pressure gradient at the salinity front enhances the bottom stress and during ebbs stratification suppresses turbulence and sediment resuspension. In a time series from across the south Skagit flats, stratification is strongest and bottom stresses are weakest during neap tides (Figure 5). During spring tides stratification develops and persists during the weaker tides around high water, but maximum stresses occur during the stronger diurnal flood and ebb.

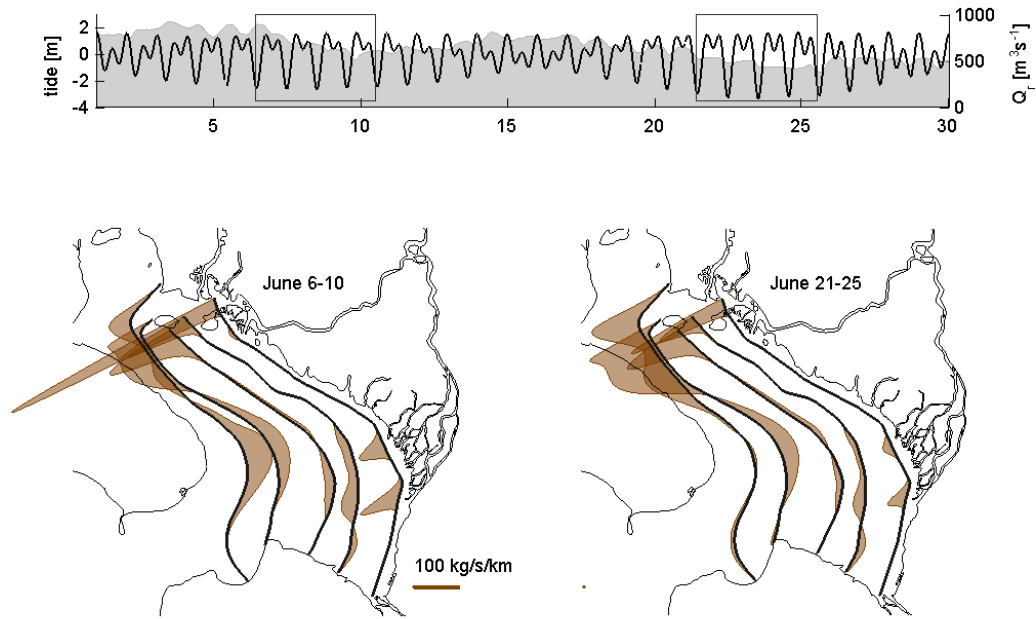


Figure 6. Maps of net sediment from the model. Sections are taken along isobaths and averaged over 4 diurnal tidal cycles (June 6-10 and June 21-25, 2009). Sediment flux is most intense offshore of the river mouths, and the flux across the tidal flats varies temporally with river discharge and spring-neap tidal forcing. Sediment is exported predominantly from the north fork where channelization and bed slopes are greater than in the south. Offshore sediment flux increased during the perigean spring of June 21-25 due to extremely low tides that allow for longer periods of exposed channel flow, as well as due to decreased stratification with lower river discharge.

An important distinction is that the transects shown in all but the bottom panel of Figure 5 follow one of the distributary channels flowing across the flats from the mouth of the south fork of the Skagit River. At low tidal stage, river discharge continues to flow in the channel, and in the upper part of the intertidal zone the channel experiences high seaward stresses associated with the river flow after the tide has receded. In contrast, the lower flats remain inundated except for the most extreme low tides, and the stress asymmetry created by the baroclinic pressure gradient and the stratification remains flood dominant. We have quantified tidal stress asymmetry with the skewness, with positive values indicative of flood-dominant stresses. The lower channel is flood dominant, with the strength of the asymmetry increasing during neap tides, but the upper channel is largely ebb dominant due to the river flux. In contrast, a section on the flats near the channel (500 m to the north) shows that without the ebb-directed stresses of the river discharge, the flats are even more flood dominant. This indicates that (1) stratification and baroclinic pressure gradient at the tidal salinity front enhance stress asymmetry and consequently sediment trapping even in shallow water, and (2) that sediment transport in the distributary channels across the flats provide the primary means for sediment export, with the net flux strongly dependent on tidal forcing and the river discharge.

Considering cross-flats slices alone would suggest that the stress asymmetry and sediment trapping at the salinity front would lead to significant sediment retention on the Skagit flats. However, bed sediment observations (by Nittrouer group) suggest that relatively little fine sediment associated with

the spring freshet is retained for extended periods on the tidal flats, and that instead much of the sediment is exported to the deeper basins to the south (Saratoga Passage) and north (Deception Pass). The realistic bathymetry and forcing of the model helps to resolve this discrepancy. Much of the observational effort discussed here focused on the broad southern Skagit flats with its network of small distributary channels. In contrast, the northern fork of the Skagit discharges over a much narrower intertidal region due to bathymetric constraints of Whidbey Island. The flats of the north fork are more channelized and have a steeper bed gradient, and thus are more efficient at moving sediment seaward during the period around low water. Additionally, the combination of tidal rectification of the along-shore currents and tidal amplification that generates a pressure gradient between Saratoga Passage and Deception Pass produces a net northward flux on the flats, seen in both the observation and the model. This along-shore current provides a mechanism for moving sediment northward where it is efficiently moved into Whidbey Channel and out Deception Pass or into Saratoga Passage (Figure 6). The results demonstrate the importance of numerical modeling with realistic bathymetry. Constructing models with sufficient resolution to capture the relevant processes remains a challenge, as evidenced by the central role of the small distributary channels across the flats that remain under-resolved by both the model grid and available bathymetric data.

IMPACT/APPLICATIONS

Results from this project may be used to enhance morphological models of near river mouths, with applications to environmental assessment for the Navy. Trapping and deposition of sediment associated with density fronts could introduce spatial and temporal variability in bed consolidation and bathymetric relief on tidal flats. The project will also help to evaluate the skill of coastal hydrodynamic models at resolving density fronts, including the surface expressions that can be assessed with remote sensing. The importance of relatively subtle features like the distributary channels for net sediment flux in shallow, stratified flows provides guidance for the resolution needed for model domains and bathymetric data to adequately capture the dominant transport processes.

RELATED PROJECTS

The work here is closely linked to several other investigators in the Tidal Flats DRI. The field efforts on the Skagit were done in conjunction with Geyer and Traykovski. The model and grid development has been in collaboration with Geoff Cowles. Collaborations with others involved in the DRI include Raubenheimer and Elgar (for bathymetry, observations for model calibration, and use of the model to interpret water column and wind observations), Lerczak (model simulations at seasonal time scales), Signell and Sherwood (CSTM implementation), and Thomson and Chickadel (bathymetry). One post-doc (Nick Nidzieko at WHOI, currently at UMD Horn Point) and one student (Vera Pavel at WHOI) worked with Ralston on results from this modeling, although neither is directly funded by the project.

PUBLICATIONS

Ralston, DK, WR Geyer, PA Traykovski, and NJ Nidzieko, 2011. Effects of Estuarine estuarine and fluvial dynamics processes on sediment transport on over deltaic tidal flats, *Continental Shelf Res.*, [submitted, refereed].

Nidzieko, NJ, and DK Ralston, 2011. Tidal asymmetry and velocity skew on an intertidal flat. *J. Geophys. Res.*, [submitted, refereed].

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